

# How To Worldbuild Magic: Short Rules for Real Worlds

[By Holly Lisle](#)

Fantasy writers take a significant amount of crap from SF writers for what the SF writers perceive as their “fluffy bunny” worldbuilding and their use of magic as an easy out for solving their characters’ problems. In fact, however, magic is no more of an easy way out for well-written fantasy than physics is an easy way out for well-written SF. The following are ten rules that will make your use of magic in your fantasy novel rigorous, and will save you from the “fluffy-bunny” label – and will, at the same time, make your story better, more entertaining, and more exciting.

## **1. Nothing comes from nothing.**

Also known as There Ain’t No Free Lunch. Your magic must come from something, must be caused by something. You must have a reason why your world has magic. You don’t have to state your reason, but you have to know it.

## **2a. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.**

When your characters start using magic, they must be made to pay for it in some way. If it is effortless, it isn’t real, and no one will believe your story. If your hero does good magic, the use of this magic will have a detrimental effect somewhere. Conversely, your villain’s magic will have good fallout somewhere.

## **2b. Actions have consequences.**

This rule is the storyteller’s best friend – in fantasy, in SF, in mainstream... anywhere. Follow the effects of your characters’ actions (from rule 2a) to their logical

conclusion. When you make your characters pay the price for their actions, when you make them both culpable and responsible, you have made them real. Give much thought to how the good and the bad of what they do affect them, and write this.

### **3. Every spell has a weakness.**

The most obdurate magical stone wall created by the mightiest evil wizard had better have a crack in it that a determined, intelligent hero can find with effort.

### **4. It ain't that easy.**

The glorious hero had better not be able to find it by picking up a convenient book and, without having any prior magical training, reading the spell that will bring the wall tumbling down.

If he does find a convenient book, reading it should backfire on him, leaving him in a worse situation than he was in before.

### **5. You only get one 'gimme' so don't waste it.**

In a world with magic, magic is your 'gimme' – the one thing about which your reader will unquestioningly suspend disbelief... so if you really want to tell a story that uses faster-than-light spaceships, you need to drop the magic.

### **6. In a world with magic, magic will touch everything.**

Do not lock your magicians in ivory towers and leave them alone up there with their dusty tomes and arcane paraphernalia. In a world where magic works, and works well, you'll see folks employing it in controlling traffic, running their septic tanks, baking bread, hunting and fishing, and anything else you can imagine.

### **7. Sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from**

**science.**

If your magicians have been working successfully for more than a few years, they will have surely developed corollaries to the steam engine, the telephone, the television, the radio, the electric iron and the toaster, the automobile, computers, the electric guitar, and the flush commode. They should not still be farking around with turning straw into gold. They probably won't wear goofy pointed hats, either, though of course they can if you insist.

**8. Magic is NOT your story. People are your story.**

There really isn't much else to say about this. Just remember that, no matter how cool your technology, it will be boring to read about unless it is background for a character your readers can care about who has a problem that engages their interest.

**9. If your hero creates a 'golly-gee save-the-day gimcrack' to solve his final problem at the end of your story, IT HAD BETTER NOT WORK!**

Never, ever, give your hero an easy way out. He needs to solve his problem with his courage and integrity and compassion and native intelligence, not with a magical fix-it that arrives out of nowhere for no reason other than that you got him into a jam you can't figure out how to get him out of.

**10. Every rule has its exception, but before you decide to be the exception, you need to spend some time using the rule.**

Break 'em all if you want – but don't break 'em all in the same story, know which rule you're breaking when, and only break a rule because you have a damned good reason to.

**11. All other rules for writing every other type of fiction also apply.**

ALL of them. And this is the exception to rule ten. There's no

exception.

**If you caught the worldbuilding bug,** and need to know how to do it professionally without OVERdoing it, [take a look at my Create a World Clinic – which includes worksheets, video demos, a class forum, and more.](#)

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